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ABSTRACT

Social studies is concerned with promoting the greater good of society. This paper examines the value of multicultural literature as a tool for this purpose. It is argued that multicultural literature can help promote the social development necessary to address important societal problems and conditions. It can be used formally or informally to facilitate broad sociocultural understanding, critical self-examination, and commitment to action. Multicultural literature can improve the social studies curriculum by supplementing traditional materials and contextualizing disciplines like geography and history. It can also enrich subjects such as science and language arts and humanize the study of contemporary issues and events, and can also be used across grade levels and with very young children. After examining specific materials and their uses, the paper discusses general implications for practice. (Contains 38 references.) (Author/SLD)

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MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE, EQUITY EDUCATION, AND THE SOCIAL STUDIES

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MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE, EQUITY EDUCATION, AND THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Abstract

Social studies is concerned with promoting the greater good of society. This paper examines the value of multicultural literature as a tool for this purpose. I argue that multicultural literature can help promote the social development necessary to address important societal problems and conditions. After examining specific materials and their uses across grade levels and content areas, the paper discusses general implications for practice.

MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE, EQUITY EDUCATION, AND THE SOCIAL STUDIES

Social education is concerned with promoting the greater good of the whole community within our democratic, pluralistic society (Banks, 1987; Noddings, 1992; Stanley, 1985). Among other things, this involves developing broader sociocultural understanding, an attitude of care and concern, a willingness to engage in social critique and critical self-reflection, and commitment to personal action that serves an increasingly broad cross-section of "others" (Banks, 1987; Barth, 1984; Giroux, 1985; Greene, 1988; Newmann, 1975; Noddings, 1992).

This paper examines the value of "multicultural literature" as a means of promoting social development for the greater good of society. First, I discuss the role of multicultural literature in the developmental process. Then, I examine specific uses of multicultural literature for formal and informal social education across grade (e.g., developmental) levels and subject areas. I conclude with a brief summary and discussion of implications for practice.

Why Multicultural Literature?

Like psychological development of any kind, "social development" (e.g., the development of sociocultural understanding, a critical, self-reflective orientation, and a propensity for unselfish personal activity) results from the struggle to reconcile new and dissonant experiences with existing understandings. Theoretically, the more substantive and varied the sociocultural experiences, the deeper and more inclusive will be the social development (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Greene, 1988; Hewitt, 1994; Houser, In Press; Nieto, 1992).

Although experience is essential, development also involves discussing and reflecting upon

the meaning of one's experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Since language is a primary tool by which humans interpret their experiences, neither personal growth nor societal improvement can be adequately achieved in the absence of discussion (Giroux, 1985; Greene, 1988).

For the purpose of this paper, "multicultural literature" will be considered literature that is written by or about those who have been systematically marginalized on the basis of their culture. Reading (experiencing) and discussing such literature can be a particularly useful means of promoting social development insofar as it facilitates social understanding and empathy, the deconstruction of cultural stereotypes, critical examination of self and society, and commitment to the development of a better world (Coles, 1989; Garcia & Pugh, 1992; Greene, 1993; Norton, 1985; Reimer, 1992; Roberts & Cecil, 1993). The more varied the literature and substantive the discussion, the broader and more substantial will be the social development.

Multicultural Literature for the Social Studies

Multicultural literature can be used across grade levels and subject areas to promote substantive social development. Perhaps the simplest approach is to supplement the formal curriculum with alternative perspectives drawn from multicultural literature. As with many traditional materials, resources such as Bass's (1991) Silver Burdett & Ginn fifth grade textbook fail to adequately represent varied sociocultural perspectives or address important social issues of the past or present. One chapter, entitled The Discovery of America, describes the encounter between European explorers and the Arawak inhabitants of the islands now called the Bahamas.

> The two peoples exchanged gifts [however], these friendly Native Americans offered no silks or spices or gold, for they had none of these to give. Of course Columbus was disappointed that he found no gold and had not yet found China or Japan. But he had reached Asia--he was sure of that. To prove it, he took on board some cinnamon, tobacco, coconuts, a few ornaments, several parrots, and six Indians. (pp. 123, 124)

The very title of this chapter reflects a "mainstream-centric" perspective (Banks, 1989). While the Europeans may have considered "America" a new world they had "discovered," to the Arawaks and other native peoples the meeting more closely resembled an invasion (McLuhan, 1971; Zinn, 1980). Supporting his claims with original documents (including Columbus' personal log), Zinn provides a very different view of the encounter:

> Columbus, desperate to pay back dividends to those who had invested, had to make good his promise to fill the ships with gold. In the providence of Cicao on Haiti, where he and his men imagined huge gold fields to exist, they ordered all persons fourteen years or older to collect a certain quantity of gold every three months. When they brought it, they were given copper tokens to hang around their necks. Indians found without a copper token had their hands cut off and bled to death....In two years, through murder, mutilation, or suicide, half of the 250,000 Indians on Haiti were dead. (1980, p. 4)

Zinn's interpretation of this and other historical events demonstrates that the textbook is clearly (and conveniently) incomplete. Although it may not always be necessary to present the vivid details described by authors like Zinn, the suppression of alternative interpretations in traditional

textbooks is both undemocratic and educationally unsound. Sanitizing the curriculum minimizes opportunities for students to struggle with differing perspectives on important historical events. Without this struggle, both personal development and social equity are ultimately diverted.

One way to explore alternative perspectives on historical events is through nonfictional literature such as McLuhan's (1971) Touch the Earth: A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence. This compilation of Native American words and perspectives centers on four basic themes, including philosophical views related to the Earth, the encroachment of European Americans, the loss of voice and identity, and the continuing fight for survival. The following passage provides an example:

> We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as "wild." Only to the white man was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land "infested" with "wild" animals and "savage" people. To us it was tame. Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery. Not until the hairy man from the east came and with brutal frenzy heaped injustices upon us and the families we loved was it "wild" for us. When the very animals of the forest began fleeing his approach, then it was that for us the "Wild West" began. (Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Oglala Sioux, quoted in McLuhan, 1971, p. 45)

Such views, eliminated from traditional curriculum materials, provide a stark contrast to the perspectives typically presented in school.

In addition to nonfictional materials like Touch the Earth, fictional literature can also be used to promote social development. For example, Yolen's (1992) Encounter tells of a Taino

boy's dream forewarning him of the dangers of the three strange birdlike ships and their inhabitants dressed like parrots. The boy's fears gradually turn to frustration and despair when, although his suspicions are confirmed, his warning to reject the newcomers nonetheless goes unheeded. The story neither mentions Columbus by name nor describes the kind of vivid abuses documented by Zinn. Nonetheless, it provides an excellent opportunity for young children to discuss a variety of important issues, including the existence of opposing perspectives and values, the fact that a single event can be interpreted in different ways, and the reasons some perspectives are heard while others are silenced.

In addition to supplementing (or replacing) the textbook, multicultural literature can also be used to enrich instructional activities. For example, geography lessons could be contextualized and humanized with books such as Lawrence's (1992) The Great Migration: An American Story. This picture book utilizes powerful paintings to help document the causes and conditions underlying African American migration from the south between the 1920s and 1950s. This book can be used to teach general geographical concepts such as interaction, region and movement; however, it also addresses the reasons for the Great Migration, the human emotions and conditions that were involved, and the diminished "life-chances" of many African Americans during that time period.2

Just as multicultural literature can be used to enrich the study of geography, it can also be used to humanize and contextualize historical understanding. History involves documenting and interpreting past conditions and events and studying their subsequent influences upon society. Because history involves interpretation, historians differ on many issues. As Davis and Woodman (1992) have noted:

> Historians disagree because they view the past from different perspectives and because they ask different questions and therefore get different answers. Historians do not just present facts, they present *some* facts and not others. (W)hen students realize this, they have *begun* their education." (pp. 2, 3, 10)

Since history involves interpretation, a variety of perspectives should be provided as a basis for analysis. Multicultural literature such as Uchida's (1978) Journey Home and Coerr's (1977) Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes can provide perspectives that challenge traditional interpretations of historical events.

Journey Home is a compelling novel about a 12-year-old girl forced during World War II to move from her home in California to a United States concentration camp for Japanese Americans. And Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes is a biographical account of a Japanese girl's valiant fight against leukemia resulting from the bombing of Hiroshima. While these materials provide a basis for studying historical concepts such as change over time and history as perspective, they can also be used to critique dominant social norms and structures and to encourage personal examination of one's own assumptions and actions.

In addition to enriching the formal social studies curriculum, multicultural literature can also promote social development in subjects such as science and language arts. For example, resources like Touch the Earth can help interrelate ecology, equity and social responsibility. Science, culture and personal responsibility can also be interrelated through novels such as Speare's (1983) The Sign of the Beaver. This story, about a colonial boy whose interaction with a Native American youth facilitates deep reflection upon his own prejudices and stereotypes,

provides an unexpected model of the general "scientific" processes of observation, reflection and change of understanding 3

Language programs can also be used to promote social development For example, elementary and middle school teachers often reserve a daily time period to read aloud to the class, and teachers at all levels select quality literature as a basis for their instruction Many teachers designate time for silent sustained reading, encourage students to read for pleasure, and maintain well-stocked classroom libraries Still others require their students to do a considerable amount of reading outside the classroom In each case, multicultural literature can be used to enrich the curriculum

Quality literature such as Myers' (1988) Scorpions and Steptoe's (1984) The Story of Jumping Mouse can promote significant social development while maintaining high literary standards related to substance, structure and enjoyment 4 Scorpions is about an African American youth who, in spite of his intense desire to gain an academic education and move out of Harlem, is unable to overcome the broader social conditions that constrain first his options, and finally his dreams Novels like Scorpions can facilitate social understanding by promoting empathy with true-to-life characters They can also help students question their assumptions that all Americans are equally free to choose how they live and are therefore equally responsible for whatever personal difficulties and diminished life chances they may encounter

The Story of Jumping Mouse, written for earlier grades, is an adaptation of a Native American story in which a mouse begins a quest to reach the "far-off land " Although the mouse encounters many obstacles of his own, he willingly sacrifices much to help others in need The mouse's compassion proves a great source of personal growth, and in the end he experiences the

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land of spiritual fulfillment in a way more wonderful than ever imagined.

Although The Story of Jumping Mouse is well written and beautifully illustrated, its most important quality is that it presents an underrepresented philosophical orientation. The view that growth is a product of personal sacrifice and community interdependence provides a sharp contrast to dominant views in which autonomy and acquisition have come to symbolize self-actualization (e.g., Greene, 1988; Maslow, 1968; Nyerere, 1968; Storm, 1972).

Since promoting the greater good of society is essential, and since reading is a fundamental educational activity, it seems reasonable to select reading materials that facilitate social development as well as literacy skills. Both goals can be advanced by reading and discussing quality multicultural literature such as Scorpions, The Story of Jumping Mouse, and numerous other materials that are becoming available.

Finally, multicultural literature can be used to examine current events and everyday issues. For example, anti-immigration sentiments (reflected by the recent rejection of Haitian refugees and California's Proposition 187 restricting the humanitarian rights of undocumented immigrants) might be addressed through multicultural literature such as Beatty's (1992) Lupita Mañana or Bunting's (1988) How Many Days to America? A Thanksgiving Story.

How Many Days to America? is a picture book about a family forced to flee their homeland with little more than the clothes they are wearing. Set adrift upon the ocean in a crowded boat, the family experiences hunger and disease. Their fear and despair intensify when they are robbed by modern day pirates. It increases again when they are turned away from a country in which they attempt to land. When the family finally reaches the United States, their permission to stay symbolizes a first "Thanksgiving."

Lupita Mañana is written for more mature readers. It is a story about a 13-year-old girl who, after her father died in a fishing accident near their small village in Mexico, was sent by her destitute mother to search for work across the border. After enduring hunger, thirst, exhaustion, betrayal and robbery, Lupita and her brother finally made it to the United States. However, upon their arrival they experience the new hardships of labor in the fields and continual fear of deportation 5. Resources such as Lupita Mañana and How Many Days to America? can add a human dimension to the study of current issues and events.

Thus, numerous multicultural resources can be used to help students examine unheard and under represented perspectives on historical conditions and current events. To the extent that these materials humanize unnamed people, contextualize generalized situations, and problematize unexamined assumptions, they can provide an indispensable resource for teachers who wish to maximize social development for the greater good of society.

Conclusion

Multicultural literature is a valuable means of promoting social development for the greater good of society. It can be used formally or informally to facilitate broad sociocultural understanding, critical self-examination, and commitment to action. Multicultural literature can improve the social studies curriculum by supplementing traditional materials and contextualizing disciplines like geography and history. Multicultural literature can also enrich subjects such as science and language arts and humanize the study of contemporary issues and events. Finally, multicultural literature can be used across grade levels. While some materials are perhaps best suited for secondary classrooms, other resources can help address alternative perspectives and

controversial issues even with very young children.

Multicultural literature is most useful if it is substantive and varied. Since substantial social development requires a struggle to reconcile new information with prior understanding, multicultural literature should address difficult sociocultural issues related to political and economic equity, social and cultural discrimination, and so forth. Moreover, since we live within a pluralistic society, this literature should represent a variety of philosophical concerns and social perspectives.

Although reading multicultural literature is essential, it is equally important to discuss the issues raised by the material. Since language is used to interpret experience, and since people often avoid thinking about personally threatening issues, teachers need to help their students focus on the aspects of the literature most closely related to social equity and personal responsibility. Meaningful literature experiences followed by thoughtful discussion can help provide such a focus.

Finally, using multicultural literature for social development involves a particular orientation. It requires believing that personal growth for the social good is both necessary and possible. It also requires a recognition that multicultural literature can help facilitate that development. For those who inform their practice on the basis of this knowledge, multicultural literature can indeed promote social development for the greater good of society.

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Footnotes

1 Of course, there are differing views on what constitutes the "greater social good" and how it might be achieved. This paper is based on the pluralist assumption that the greater good of the community requires affirmation of individual strengths and differences along with concern and responsibility for the well-being of an ever-expanding circle of others.

2 Banks (1987) argues strongly for the need to address the diminished life chances of dominated sociocultural groups rather than reducing multicultural education to the study of exotic life styles and decontextualized contributions.

3 Speare's novel has been criticized on several grounds (e.g., for failing to permit the Native American characters to speak in their own voices). While these criticisms merit serious attention, the book nonetheless provides an excellent model of the critical self-reflection that can occur among European Americans as they begin to interact and identify with members of other sociocultural groups. Since, like other materials, multicultural literature varies with regard to quality, each sample should be independently considered to determine whether and how it should be used.

4 Myers' Scorpions is a Newbery Honor book, and Steptoe's The Story of Jumping Mouse received the Caldecott Honor and was selected as an ALA Notable Book.

5 Although Beatty's novel provides a powerful image of the extreme hardships encountered by many who seek refuge in the United States, some legitimate concerns have been raised about the perpetuation of certain stereotypes in her writing. While the positives may sometimes outweigh the negatives, students should be encouraged to examine both the strengths and the limitations of any given piece of literature.